

Old town hall in Aptos to get new lease on life

"At Valencia are the mills, etc., of the F.A. Hihn Company. Both villages have good schools, a neat settlement of houses, a 'store' or two, a little hall for public gatherings, and other comforts of home."

—History of Santa Cruz County, by Phillip Francis, circa 1900

By BOB SMITH
STAFF WRITER

A century ago, Valencia was a vibrant little village tucked away in the foothills above Aptos Village.

Home to the dozens of loggers and mill workers who worked for the F.A. Hihn Lumber Co., Valencia boasted the usual amenities of 19th century rural life — a post office, a community hall and a school house.

Like the vanished town of Loma Prieta — its companion town and competitor over on Aptos Creek — Valencia's life depended on the timber business. When the seemingly endless redwood groves that spread across the face of the Santa Cruz Mountains were finally gone in the 1920s, the two towns began to die.

Today, Loma Prieta is just a memory — its presence marked only by some fire-blackened timbers at the old sawmill site on the edge of the Forest of Nisene Marks State Park.

Valencia, perhaps because it was on the edge of a thriving apple-growing region and astride a road that went somewhere, survived.



Valencia's town hall was a center for community activity in the logging days.

Mike McCollum

But traces of its former are hard to find today.

The sawmill is gone. So is the store. The little narrow-gauge railroad that shuttled back and forth between Valencia and the rail junction in Aptos Village has been supplanted by two lanes of asphalt.

There are survivors from the 19th century, however. Two are the old post office and the community hall. And both show the ravages of time and the force of the Oct. 17 earthquake.

Valencia Hall stands beside Valencia Creek at the intersection of Valencia and Bear Creek Roads.

The post office, a tiny 12-by-24-foot building when first constructed, was a private residence before the quake ripped it apart, separating it from a later addition. A red warning placard with the notation "building destroyed" is affixed to the front gate.

The hall fared slightly better in the quake.

Built in the 1880s by Hihn for his employees, its interior today is forlorn. Once the scene of community meetings, dances, church services and farm meetings, the hall today is virtually empty. A couple of wooden benches and wooden folding chairs are stacked against the wood-paneled, green-painted walls.

The wooden floor is cracked and buckled, the result of the Oct. 17 earthquake. And the air inside the high-ceilinged hall reeks of decay and disuse.

But there are plans to save the

A new foundation will be built under the hall with a small kitchen, handicap-equipped restrooms and a ramp for the handicapped at the rear.

The building will be brought up to building codes, Mitchell said, including new electrical, vice, water and sewer services and fire sprinklers.

The covered porch that originally shaded the front entrance to the hall was removed decades ago to make room for a widened Valencia Road. That will be faithfully rebuilt, following old photographs. Outside, a 31-space gravel parking lot will be built.

Mitchell said work could begin this fall — once the Parks Department gets a rezoning application through the county Planning Commission. The new site is zoned for agriculture and it has to be changed to a "public facilities" zone.

The post office is another matter, however. Owner Robert Knight would like to build a new home on the post office site and has offered the old post office building to the county — if it can be moved.

That raises two issues, Mitchell and County Planner John Warren told the Historical Resources Commission. First, the county doesn't have the money — estimated at between \$50,000 and \$75,000 — to move and restore the post office. Second, if Knight moves the building, then he has to go through the complete application process for a new building and there is some doubt that he could build a new home on his lot, sandwiched between Valencia Creek and Valencia Road. But if he applies for a permit to repair the quake damage to the old buildings, then he gets a different, more favorable, treatment from the county planners.

Mitchell said Knight is reluctant to sign over the post office to the county until he knows what will happen to his applications pending in the Planning Department.

building. The Santa Cruz County Historical Resources Commission yesterday approved a Parks and Recreation Department plan to move the building across Bear Valley Road to a county-owned lot.

The county has already received a \$110,000 grant from the state for the work, but Parks Department representative Dave Mitchell said it will cost an estimated \$250,000 to do the job.

The plans call for demolishing the add-on stage, kitchen, and ill-equipped restrooms at the back of the hall, lifting it off its redwood stump foundations, and moving it across Bear Valley Road to its new home against a hill.